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Imagine a long stretch of lakefront land untouched by commercial development -- no houses, no hotels, no hot dog stands. The Navy will enter an agreement today to turn over a 1.3-mile stretch of lakefront at Fort Sheridan to Openlands, a Chicago-based preservation group. The bluffs and beach will become a public park, with trails for hiking and cycling.

"These are the only untouched bluffs along the entire Lake Michigan shoreline," said Rep Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who brokered the deal. The transfer comes as the Navy is redeveloping its land holdings north of Chicago, partly to improve housing for those who serve in the Great Lakes Naval Station. It has brought in a private developer to build or renovate 1,600 homes in towns such as Glenview and Highland Park. Occupying parts of Highland Park and Highwood, Fort Sheridan operated from 1887 until 1993. In 1998, the Army started turning over the fort's northern 259 acres to the Lake County Forest Preserve District. The Army gave the southern portion to the Navy. The Navy's section included the pristine bluffs, home to five plant species that are endangered in Illinois, according to Joyce O'Keefe, deputy director of Openlands.

Kirk decided to step in after hearing private developers wanted to build high-rises there. He got Congress to approve giving Openlands the property for free. "The last thing we need is high-rises along these bluffs," Kirk said.

The area will be called the Fort Sheridan Lakefront Preserve. At its narrowest, it stretches 100 feet inland from the top of the bluffs. But it encompasses ravines, too, some of which extend 500 yards inland.

Public access -- later

The preserve will not be open to the public for at least a year, O'Keefe said. Openlands must remove weeds, clear dead wood and reseed some bluffs and ravines. After that comes the work of creating trails -- along the top of the bluffs and in Bartlett Ravine, for example -- and putting up signs. Once open, the beach will not be a swimming beach, but a place to walk, ponder the lake and watch "thousands of migratory birds," O'Keefe said. "There's just no place else in

Illinois where there is a public ownership of a mile of shoreline that has this ecosystem, this bluff," O'Keefe said.